Endless Roads by randomfan276

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Summary: Max raised her eyebrows, but her face was still tight with mistrust. "Then why have you been such a dick to me?" "For what it's worth, I think I've been a dick to everyone," Mike mused, rather than answering. Post-S2, Mike and Max become friends. Pure fix-it fluff.

1. Chapter 1

Endless Roads

Chapter 1

It was nearly three in the morning when Mike found her.

Will had arrived back at the house an hour earlier, bundled into a coat several sizes too large and tucked into Mrs Byers' side in a way that made him look much younger than he actually was. His eyes tracked wearily around the room, grazing over Dustin and Lucas and Max and Steve before finally landing on Mike, and when the two locked gazes the whole room fell away.

Despite the exhaustion lining the smaller boy's face, there was a gleam of energy in his eyes that was purely *Will*, and Mike knew in an instant that the Mind Flayer was gone. He grinned, stumbling forward to wrap his arms around his friend, and felt the tension ease from his heart as Will's arm snaked its way over his shoulders.

They only had twenty minutes to soak in each other's presence before Mrs Byers gently told the boys that Will needed to rest. Mike opened his mouth to protest, but slammed it shut when he noticed the pronounce tremble of her arm as she reached out for her son and led him from the room.

She needed some time with Will. Mike could understand that.

So, when Dustin and Lucas started complaining, Mike told them to shut up and help him clean the kitchen instead. He was expecting an argument – there was always an argument, lately – so he was pleasantly surprised when they both immediately snapped their mouths shut, exchanged an inscrutable look with each other, then complied.

He was pretty sure that look was some sort of commentary on him. A week ago, he would have called them out on it, grumpily accusing them of talking about him behind his back.

Now, though? He couldn't really bring himself to care.

He divided the chores in the kitchen, ordering each boy to a separate corner, and for forty minutes he lost himself in busy camaraderie. They tossed playful insults back and forth even as they carefully swept up broken glass, put crockery back in its rightful place on the shelf and debated the best way to fix the kitchen table.

Although he had to admit, the debate was becoming decidedly less friendly by the second.

Mike was all-too-experienced in recognising the signs of an escalating argument. He paused in his work, wide eyes darting back and forth between his friends as Dustin's gestures grew progressively wilder and Lucas' voice became increasingly edged with snark.

And – yeah. He really didn't have the energy for this.

There was an over-full trash bag in the centre of the room, and Mike jumped on the opportunity to escape. He took off for the front door, bag clutched firmly in one hand, and waved off their calls for input in favour of stepping out in the cool, blissfully quiet, night air.

The Byers' front porch had always been his favourite thing about the house. It was cosy in winter but cool in summer, sheltered enough to provide some privacy but still somehow open and welcoming with its worn floorboards and scattering of well-loved furniture. When they were younger – and, more recently, when Will was still recovering from the Upside Down and Mrs Byers wanted him close – they had whiled away entire afternoons on the deck, enjoying the illusion of freedom afforded by the low railing and fresh air.

Now, the wooden slats creaked beneath his shoes, grounding him as he took two steps forward and rested his weight against the banister.

Stars dotted the inky black sky, surprisingly clear without the light pollution of the town. In the distance, he could just make out the faint outline of woodland treetops. They swayed slowly in the gentle breeze, the same cool fingers of air that played with his hair and caressed his cheek, and he felt himself sink into the sensation, closing his eyes and slumping forward against the railing.

Will was going to be okay.

Eleven was okay, according to Hopper's most recent radio update.

The gate was closed, and the Mind Flayer was gone.

It was over.

For the first time in nearly a year, he allowed himself to *breathe.*

It was going to be okay.

The silence enveloped him, filling his mind, until it was suddenly shattered by a small sniffling sound from behind. He startled, lurching upright and whirling around in a single movement. The trash bag crashed to the ground, his arms reflexively rising defensively before him, and his eyes tore over the porch furniture in search of the source.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

Mike followed the voice, twisting his neck to the right. A square of yellow light streaming from the living room window illuminated the porch swing and there, curled into the corner, was a small figure with bright red hair.

"Max," he breathed. His arms dropped to his side and he swayed, relieved. Jesus Christ. He hadn't even noticed that she had disappeared. "How long have you been out here?"

He didn't mean to sound accusatory, but his heart was pounding erratically in his chest and his voice was hoarse with exhaustion, so the words came out harsher than he intended.

Max's silhouette instantly stiffened in response.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she snapped. "I should have realised this whole porch belonged to you."

Mike' fear faded as quickly as it had come, replaced by irritation. His eyes narrowed, and he folded his arms across his chest. "No, it belongs to the person who thinks she can just waltz into our lives and

pretend she fits in.'

She flinched backwards, hurt flickering across her face, and he felt a small pang of regret. But he squashed it down and bit his tongue, not trusting himself to speak, before turning his back to her and staring intently at the road.

The road that was still horribly, terribly, empty.

He leaned forward once more, resting his forearms on the banister, and tapped a mindless rhythm with his foot. *Come on, El. We're all waiting for you.*

"I'm not trying to replace her, you know. I didn't even know she existed until yesterday."

He froze, not expecting the comment, and didn't dare look away from the path. He opened his mouth, a thousand different replies ready on his tongue, and –

You don't get to talk about her

You could never replace her; she's worth ten of you

Nobody asked you

Just leave me alone

- and he slammed his mouth shut, a sickening feeling creeping into his throat.

Shit.

When did he turn into a mouth-breather?

Max shifted behind him and Mike released a breath he hadn't realised he was holding, fighting against a tight feeling in his chest.

Maybe it was time to make a change.

He squared his shoulders and pushed himself upright. Then he walked stiffly over to the swing and lowered himself into the space

beside the redhead, who was eyeing him warily.

"Yeah, I know," he sighed.

Max raised her eyebrows, but her face was still tight with mistrust. "Then why have you been such a dick to me?"

"For what it's worth, I think I've been a dick to everyone," Mike mused, rather than answering.

She didn't respond, so he let his gaze wander back to the driveway as he continued. "Except for Will, maybe. He's the only person I've been able to talk to for the last year, but he never even met El, and he's had his own stuff to deal with."

He felt rather than saw Max squint in confusion. "What do you mean? I thought all you guys were close – a Party?"

"We are," Mike confirmed, then dropped his gaze to his shoes and scuffed his toe against the floor. "But…they got sick of talking about it, I guess. I don't know."

He could feel Max's stare boring into his side and tamped down on a flare of annoyance, pressing his lips together to avoid biting out a snarky comment.

Why did she rile him so much? He wasn't sure, but he couldn't shake the feeling that his anger was probably a bit disproportionate for her snark. Maybe it had more to do with him than her, after all.

And wasn't that a pleasant thought.

The silence was awkward, but Mike didn't have it in him to keep talking. So, he pushed his toe firmly against the ground, moving the swing slowly back and forth, then rested his against the side pole with a sigh.

God, he was just so *done* with it all. As soon as El and Hopper arrived, he was dragging them both inside and collapsing onto a couch somewhere, and god help anyone who woke him up before noon.

The cushion bounced slightly as Max repositioned herself. Then, he heard her careful intake of breath from beside him.

"When my mum started dating my step-dad, I was so angry," she murmured. Her voice was quieter than he had ever heard, but the words carried clearly through the still night air. "I hated him, and I hated Billy even more. So, I spent a lot of time away from home – at the skate park, at the arcade – and I slept over at my friends' places whenever I could. And I guess I complained too much, because after a while they stopped inviting me over."

Mike winced, sympathy immediately flooding over him, and glanced over at her. Her eyes were wide and genuine, her jaw trembling slightly with uncertainty, and her shoulders were hunched protectively around her neck.

She looked more vulnerable than he had ever thought possible.

"I don't think it's possible to spend too much time complaining," he offered, meeting her gaze and pressing his lips together with concern. "Your step-brother is nuts. I mean, Nancy can be annoying, but he's just a total psycho."

Max snorted. "Nancy is a saint compared to Billy."

"Did you see the look on his face when you swung the bat between his legs?" Mike recalled, awed. "I think you scared the crap out of him. Probably literally."

That prompted a small laugh, but then Max shook her head, her lips twisting into a grimace. "We'll see. It could go either way."

The words hung uncomfortably between them, then the meaning clicked into place.

Frowning, Mike leaned forward to rest a shaky hand on her arm. "Wait, what are you saying?"

Max shrugged him off, expression shutting down once more as she glanced away into the darkness rather than meet his eyes. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," Mike insisted, unintentionally raising his voice to a half-shout.

Max shushed him, eyes darting toward the door, before gripping his forearm in warning. "Let it *go*," she hissed. "This isn't about you."

"The hell it isn't," Mike snapped, affronted. "You wanted in the Party? Fine, you're in. I'm not going to stand by and let you get hurt in your own home."

For a fleeting moment, he should she would relent.

Her eyes glistened, her lips trembled with emotion, and she stared at him with a mixture of shock and hurt.

But then, something changed. He watched in confusion as she blinked her tears away before they could fall, crossed her arms across her chest and glared daggers into his soul.

"What the hell is your problem?" she lashed out. "You need to protect people to feel useful, or something? I've seen the way you act around Will and Eleven. Stop treating people like they're made of glass."

Mike shrunk back, heart clenching. It took everything he had not to break her gaze, but he forced himself to hold steady.

"It's not like that," he protested, weakly, but she cut him off before he could continue, scorn curling her upper lip.

"Sure, it's not."

That same tired anger was bubbling forth one more and this time Mike did look away, chest heaving as he whipped his gaze back to the driveway.

What he saw made him spring to his feet, eyes wide and anger instantly forgotten.

There were pinpricks of light at the end of the road, growing larger by the second, accompanied by the growl of a familiar engine.

"El."

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

It was, by far, the weirdest sleepover Max had ever seen.

Dustin disappeared down the hall, dragging a reluctant Lucas behind him, only to emerge minutes later with a veritable mountain of blankets and pillows.

Hopper stared at them with horrified eyes, then sprung to his feet with an uncharacteristic spryness. He paused only long enough to mutter something about old age and back pain before booking it out of the room in record time, presumably in search of an actual bed, and didn't show his face again for the rest of the night.

Jonathan made to pull Nancy to his own bedroom, but she shook her head, her eyes flitting anxiously between her brother and Steve, whose bruises were starting to darken even as he stretched himself out on the couch. Max couldn't hear what she said, but whatever it was made Jonathan's face soften in understanding. He immediately changed course, releasing her elbow in favour of snagging a bundle of blankets and arranging them into a makeshift nest directly in front of the couch. Nancy, meanwhile, gently tugged Mike and Eleven out of their corner, and within minutes all five teenagers were lying snugly in the middle of the room, shoulder-to-shoulder with the people they cared about most.

Which left Max to deal with the two idiots currently arguing over pillows.

Well, not idiots. They had made that abundantly clear over the last few days, no matter how much she teased them for it.

Sighing, Max picked up the last pillow from the ground walked over to them. "Hey, morons," she interrupted, not caring in the least about minding her manners. Her mother would be horrified. "Time for sleep."

She tilted her head toward a relatively bare corner of the room and

led the way, dropping onto the worn carpet with her head to the wall. It took a few minutes of wriggling to find a comfortable position and by the time she was done they had found their own areas, Lucas to her right and Dustin by their feet.

"Night," Lucas mumbled, and she heard a few people grunt in response.

Exhaling slowly, Max closed her eyes and forced her aching muscles to relax, one by one. Her limbs were growing heavier by the second, exhaustion washing over her until, finally, she cleared her mind and allowed herself to drift away.

She wasn't sure she would be able to sleep, her nerves still jazzed from the nightmare of a day. But she must have been more tired than she realised because moments later she blinked her eyes open and squinted against bright sunlight streaming through the nearby window.

Her heart raced and she sat up, staring blankly at the unfamiliar room, completely disoriented. Then, the memories came rushing back, and she forced herself to take a shaky breath in.

Monster dogs and tunnels and psychic girls.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Someone muttered to her right and she glanced down. It was Lucas, whose head had slipped off his pillow and was now mushed into the carpet, his lips moving soundlessly. Dustin was sprawled at his feet, one arm thrown carelessly over both of their legs, utterly dead to the world. They must have been just as tired as she was, she figured, since neither of them stirred when she eased herself out from underneath Dustin and pushed herself to her feet.

A quick sweep of the room confirmed what she already suspected – the couch and its surroundings were empty, the blankets carefully folded and stacked on one of the chairs. Everyone else must already be awake.

She picked a careful path across the room and entered the hallway.

Now that she was closer, she could hear a low hum of voices emanating from the kitchen, and the familiar crackling sound of the stove being ignited. She took a step closer, intending to join them.

Then, she hesitated.

Last night, everything had happened so quickly. Lucas had shown up at her house and invited her along, but Steven and Dustin had been frosty to her from the minute she stepped foot in the bus. Then, the demodogs had appeared, and from there they had all been swept along a river of adrenaline-fuelled craziness, and nobody seemed to question her presence.

Now, though, everything felt different.

What the hell was she doing here?

She shuffled her feet, feeling hopelessly out of place and more awkward than she had since she left California, and considered her options. The Byers' house was a way out of town, but the walk was probably doable. Or she could ask Steve for a lift – she was pretty sure he would agree if she threatened to take his car and drive herself – but then she would have to join everyone else in the kitchen and the thought of that made her want to sink through the floor.

Walking it was, then.

She turned with a sigh, preparing to head for the front door, when the sound of her own name drifting from the kitchen pulled her up short.

"Which one is Max again?"

The voice was hoarse with fatigue, but it could only belong to Hopper. No one else in the house could match his deep tone.

"Are you kidding me? The redhead."

That was definitely Mike, and his voice grated. She ground her teeth, feeling her cheeks heat with anger. He was talking about her behind her back now? Fucking great.

"Look, you saw what Billy did to Steve," Mike continued, his voice low and urgent. "He was looking for Max, and I don't know what would have happened if Steve hadn't been here. I'm just saying that maybe you could pay him a visit, you know, let him know what will happen to him if anything happens to her…"

"Kid, I'm going to stop you right there. The Chief of Police can't be seen threatening teenagers."

"Aren't you supposed to be *protecting* teenagers?"

"Watch it, pal. I've had a long day – a long *year* – and I don't need you crapping on me at every turn. I'll look into it, okay?"

"No, not okay. Why can't you just – ugh. Whatever. El and I will figure it out."

"What? No – stop, kid. She can't be seen, you understand me? This is bigger than your little Party. She uses her powers in public, she ends up right back in that lab – or worse."

"Maybe that's not your choice to make. I know El would want to help."

"Max?" Max jumped a foot in the air, a hundred excuses ready on her tongue as she whirled around to find Lucas standing behind her. He didn't seem to notice her guilty expression, his eyes still half-lidded with sleep as he scrubbed a tired hand over his face. "Why are you standing out here?"

She hesitated, her eyes darting quickly between the kitchen and front door, before turning back to Lucas with a deliberately-casual shrug.

"No reason," she said quickly, before jerking her thumb toward the kitchen. "I'm pretty sure I smell bacon, though. Coming in?"

She wasn't lying – the enticing scent was starting to drift through the whole house. Dustin ambled up the hall, hair sticking up in all directions, and barely seemed to notice them as he followed the smell and brushed right past.

Lucas met Max's gaze, and she mustered something resembling a

smile. Then she turned and followed Dustin's lead.

The small room was packed with people. Jonathan and Nancy stood together at the stove, loading plate after plate with huge piles of bacon and eggs. Mrs Byers was mixing pancake batter in a large bowl and chatting amiably with a surprisingly animated Eleven, while Steve and Will wore identical exhausted expressions as they sat at the table and picked away at their meals.

Mike and Hopper were huddled together in the corner nearest the doorway. Mike was glaring at the floor, cheeks flushed pink with anger, but Hopper's eyes were fixed on Max, narrowed in scrutiny.

Max froze, catching his gaze and glaring right back. Discomfort slithered across her chest and she opened her mouth, ready to give him a piece of her mind, but was cut off by Nancy pressing a plate of food into her hands with an uncertain smile. She quirked her lips slightly in response, and then Steve's hand was on her arm, tugging her down into the empty seat beside him, and when glanced back over they were gone, Mike now hovering next to Eleven while Hopper disappeared from the room altogether.

The conversation rankled, but Max decided to let it slide – for now. She instinctively wanted to chide Mike for sticking his nose into her business, but – well. As much as she hated to admit it, part of her was strangely warmed by seeing him worry for her. Her own mother didn't seem to care about Billy's attitude, after all, and the occasional friend who expressed concern had never tried to actually *do* anything about it.

Just her luck that the first person to try to help her also happened to be a complete asshole.

He seemed to be going out of his way to avoid her gaze, though, so she returned the favour and focussed instead on shovelling food into her suddenly-ravenous stomach, allowing herself to get drawn into the cacophony of conversations surrounding the table.

The day passed quickly after that.

Breakfast turned out be lunch, since no one had managed to wake

before noon, and as soon as the plates were cleared everyone scattered to assist with what seemed like an endless amount of clean-up. Will's map needed to be torn down from the walls, the food Dustin had thrown on the floor needed to be discarded (*"But why is* that thing *in my freezer?" "It needed to be preserved! This could lead to a scientific breakthrough!"*), and it took three loads of washing to remove the grime from all the blankets and towels used the day before.

Max kept herself busy, for the most part sticking close to Lucas, but somehow in the late afternoon she found herself in the kitchen, wiping down the bench after a quick afternoon tea with only a pale-looking Will for company.

The smaller boy was sitting quietly at the table, eyeing a blank piece of paper with more anxiety than Max thought the situation really required.

"Are you okay?" she asked, and then cursed herself out.

Of course, he wasn't okay.

"Sorry," she backtracked hastily, "I just meant –" She broke off her sentence, gesturing at the paper gripped in his hand. "What's that for?"

Will, bless him, didn't make fun of her stammering. Instead, he tightened his grip hard enough to crumple the sheet and gave a helpless shrug. "I like drawing," he explained. "It calms me down when I get stressed. But, right now…well. You know."

Max furrowed her brow, trying to figure out what he meant. Then it hit her, and she smacked her forehead with her palm before she could stop herself. "Oh, right. The map."

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but Will just nodded solemnly.

"Yeah, the map. I don't think I'll be drawing for a while."

Max swallowed, for once entirely lost for words. What *was* there to say to a boy she'd barely met before he fell into a possessed state and nearly died?

The silence in the room was deafening, the awkwardness growing thicker by the second, and she desperately tried to cast her mind for a new topic of conversation.

Finally, Will exhaled heavily and glanced up at her. "So, you and Lucas seem close."

Surprised, Max felt her eyes widen, her flush darkening against her will. "I don't like him!" she blurted out.

"I never said you did." Will's words were dry, but his eyes sparked with humour. "It was just an observation."

If it was anyone else, Max would have responded with a vehement argument. But there was something about Will – his skinny frame, his pale face, his gentle demeanour – that ripped through her defences like tissue paper, defusing her anger before it even had a chance to ignite.

So, instead, she raised her eyebrows and pointedly turned away, making a show of wiping the already immaculate benchtop.

Will laughed, briefly, and raised his hands in surrender. "Alright, I'm sorry! I'll stop, promise."

"You'd better," Max grumbled, but there was no heat to her words, and she let herself give up the pretence, dropping into the chair beside him.

The piece of paper was still crumpled in his hand and she eased it from his grip, smoothing it out. Carefully, she set it back down on the table before him. "You should draw," she said, softly. "Maybe not right now, but when you're ready. The Mind Flayer messed with you enough – don't let it take this too."

Will paused, his throat working as he swallowed. He pressed his lips together then nodded, slowly, and turned to face her. His eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

"Thanks," he whispered.

The air was thick, weighed down by a solemnity that Max wasn't sure

she was ready for. Dismissing the thought, she cleared her throat and smiled humourlessly. "Sure," she said, and made to stand.

A thin hand grabbed at her forearm, pulling her to a halt.

"Wait." Will's voice was firm and when she glanced his way, she was surprised to find him watching her with a steady gaze, the pain from moments ago already vanished.

Or maybe he had just become an expert at hiding it.

"I just want to say…you're one of us now, you know? You didn't have to get dragged into this mess, but you did anyway, so. Welcome to the Party."

Affection blossomed in her chest, only be immediately drowned by a wave of frustration. "Your 'leader' doesn't seem so welcoming," she pointed out.

Will's face fell, his eyes darting briefly to the wall separating them from Mike. "He'll come around," he said, although he sounded unsure. "Mike's not really been himself lately."

Max snorted. Her fingers were twitching anxiously, so she shoved them into her pockets and plastered a confident expression on her face. "I figured. Why else would you guys put up with him?"

Instantly, she realised it was the wrong thing to say.

Will's expression slammed shut, his spine stiffening. He tore his gaze away from her to stare at the blank piece of paper with intensity.

Max flinched, regret flooding through her. *There you go again, Maxine. Shoot your mouth and insult everyone who's nice to you. No wonder you don't have any friends.*

"Will, I –"

A loud bang cut her off, making her jump. It was followed by a clatter of footsteps, and she twisted in her chair in time to see Lucas and Dustin barge into the room with what she had come to recognise as their usual level of boundless energy.

"I'm just *saying,* D'art obviously remembered me. He had some intelligence beyond the hive mind, which means he has the potential to make his own decisions. He's not inherently evil."

"And *I'm* just saying, you've lost your damn mind. They're monsters, Dustin!" Lucas punctuated his sentence with a jerky wave of his hand, then spotted Max and turned to her imploringly. "You agree with me, right? He's crazy."

Max looked desperately at Will, but the smaller boy was frowning at a spot on the table, deliberately ignoring her gaze.

Well, shit.

Biting back a sigh, she turned her attention to the newcomers and rolled her eyes in Dustin's direction. "I can't believe you wanted to keep him as a pet.".

"Yes!" Lucas pumped the air. "I *told* you, dude. You're wrong on this one."

Max made a mental note to apologise to Will later and let herself get swept away in the debate, deliberately silencing her traitorous inner voice that sounded suspiciously like her mother.

This wasn't California. New town, new Max, new friends who actually seemed to like her despite her initial attempts to push them away.

She wasn't going to ruin it this time.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

"That's him? The mouth-breather?"

"Yes," Mike confirmed. He pressed his right hand into the dirt, stabilising himself so he could twist from his crouch and see El more clearly. One downside of his recent growth spurt – it made stakeouts like this much more difficult.

El's brow was furrowed, her dark eyes fixed intently on the target. Her face was pale but determined, the last traces of eyeliner only serving to enhance her resolve. Her hair, now free from the gel that had been holding it in place, fell around her face in soft, unruly curls.

Mike drank in the sight, committing every detail to memory, and pretended that it wasn't because he was worried she would disappear again.

Because that wasn't going to happen.

He wouldn't let it happen.

Distant shouting drew his attention back to the present, and he jerked his gaze back to the target. They were crouched behind a bush, in the back corner of an empty lot that sloped up toward a narrow, quiet street. The property was unkempt and uncared-for, weeds dotting the overgrown grass that would have reached above his knees if he was standing. Across the street was a battered one-story house of white weatherboard and orange shingles, and it was from that building that the yelling could be heard.

Mike was so busy glaring daggers at the house that he didn't even notice his hand clenching into a fist. "I think I'm starting to understand where he gets it from," he muttered to himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw El glance at him questioningly, so he leaned in closer to explain. "I talked to Steve this morning. He said that Billy has been acting like he has to prove himself, or something."

He jerked his head to the house across the street, where a more familiar voice had now joined in the yelling. "Billy's dad just called him some pretty awful names. Might explain why he is the way the he is."

El frowned, turning the words over in her head, but, if anything, she looked more confused than she had before.

"Fathers protect," she said, slowly. For some reason, it came out sounding more like a question than a statement. "Why would he call him names?"

"Well, not all fathers are cut out for the job," Mike explained, gently, before registering her blank expression and giving himself a mental slap. "I mean – fathers *should* protect, but not every dad wants to be a dad, and some aren't very good at it. Some try to do better. And some just don't care."

It wasn't a good explanation, but El seemed to understand the gist. She nodded, a guilty expression washing over her, and shifted slightly in the dirt.

Mike frowned. "What's wrong?"

She chewed her bottom lip, choosing her words with her usual level of care. "Hopper protected me," she finally stated, barely above a whisper.

Mike's breath caught, a stabbing pain tearing into his chest.

It must have shown on his face, because El reached out and rested her hand on his forearm, her eyes fixed imploringly on his own. "In the Upside Down," she elaborated. "With the dogs. He protected me."

His breath released in a gush. "Yeah," he croaked, "but the rest of it – El. He kept you hidden for a year. You would still *be* hidden if you hadn't run away. That's not protecting you, that's – that's –." Words escaped him, and he settled for gesticulating angrily at nothing.

El caught his flailing limb with ease. With her other hand, she carefully folded his long fingers around her palm, then returned her gaze back to his own.

"He tried," she said, firmly. "He cared."

Mike's throat was dry. "And, you?" he asked, hoarsely. "Do you care?"

There was no hesitation. She nodded, the gesture as honest as everything else she ever did.

Well, then.

Mike blew the air out through his cheeks, hoping that some of his inner fire would go with it. "Alright," he caved. "Alright."

El squeezed his hand, and after a moment he squeezed back.

It must have been enough for her because she turned back to their target, setting her jaw once more, and pressed her shoulder against his own. "Ready?" she asked.

Mike nodded, pulling himself to his feet.

They moved quickly, stepping out from behind the bush and tracing a path to the house, but only made it halfway there when a familiar truck appeared at the end of the street. Mike let out a shocked curse, dropping instantly to the ground and dragging El down with him. There wasn't a lot of cover where they were so he flattened himself out, hoping that the slope would offer some protection, and desperately tried to blend into the long grass.

"What the hell is he doing here?" he hissed.

El shook her head, eyes wide, equally confused.

Gravel crunched beneath rubber tyres as the truck pulled up in front of the house, then the engine cut out. Mike heard the sound of a door clicking open, followed by half-a-dozen heavy footsteps and a sharp rap of a practiced knock on the front door.

Mike gaped at El, unable to believe his ears, and risked a glance across the street.

Sure enough, Hopper's familiar brown truck was parked in front of the house, the man himself waiting impatiently at the front door, his

stocky shoulders and broad-brimmed hat immediately recognisable even from this distance.

What. The. Hell.

The door swung open and Mike slammed himself back into the ground. He barely dared to breathe, ears straining to pick out the conversation, but the shouting had subsided and from this distance the conversation was too quiet to discern.

He glanced over to El, then jolted in surprise. There was blood dripping from her nose.

"El?" he whispered, uncertainly.

She didn't respond, her eyes screwed shut and her brow furrowed with concentration, but a moment later the radio swinging from Mike's hip crackled to life.

" – and you're damn lucky he's not pressing charges, because there's enough witnesses to put you away for a very long time."

It was Hopper, and he was angrier than Mike had ever heard him.

"Shit, Billy, you waste of space." Mike had never seen the owner of that voice, but he would have bet his Millennium Falcon that it belonged to Billy's dad. "I ask you to do one thing for me – look after your sister – and you try to get yourself arrested? What fucking good are you if you can't even do one simple job?"

Mike winced, El's grip tightening around his hand to an almost painful degree. He looked over to find that her eyes were now open, glaring in the direction of the house, raw fury contorting her features.

"Not a father," she growled, her voice quiet but firm.

Mike wriggled his fingers until she glanced his way, loosening her grip as soon as she realised his predicament. Then he sidled closer and gently nudged her shoulder in understanding.

"Not a father," he agreed.

They fell silent, El returning her focus to the conversation, and before long the radio crackled to life once more.

"– so let me make this absolutely, crystal clear," Hopper was saying. "If I see one mark on that girl, I'm coming for you. I know your name, and the names on all those fake IDs you have stashed in your nightstand. There's nowhere you can hide from me. You won't do well in prison, kid, and I'll do whatever it takes to get you locked up. Do we have an understanding?"

"Yessir."

That could only be Billy, but his voice was so thin that Mike barely recognised it. He shared a surprised glance with El, which quickly turned to horror when he realised what was about to happen.

"Quick!" Mike hissed, grabbing El by the elbow and breaking her concentration. "We've got to get – shit."

He broke off his own sentence as he saw the door open, Hopper's familiar silhouette once more appearing on the step. Hunkering down, he shared a desperate glance with El, who looked back at him and shrugged helplessly. They had nothing to hide behind; their only hope was that Hopper didn't look in their direction.

Hope was one thing Mike usually had in abundance, but in this case even he had to admit it was wearing thin.

Sure enough, it was only moments later that he heard footsteps approaching, and then a shadow fell over them both. Mike expelled his breath through pursed lips, sharing a guilty glance with El before pushing himself into a sitting position. The sun was in his eyes, so he was squinting when he looked up at the man standing before them, but even then he could recognise the Chief's distinctly unimpressed expression.

"Hi," El greeted. Her tone was surprisingly jaunty, almost cheeky, in complete dissonance to Mike's swirling mixture of panic and anger. She rolled onto her haunches in a move more graceful than Mike could ever hope to pull off while the dark-haired boy blinked at her, taken aback.

But, of course she's comfortable with him, he reprimanded himself sharply. Three hundred and fifty-three days was a long time to get to know someone.

"Hi," Hopper echoed, dryly. He jerked his thumb back at his truck. "Come on. This isn't the right place to talk about this."

El immediately stood up but Mike hesitated, glancing behind him to the spot where he had stashed his bike.

Hopper followed his gaze, rolling his eyes when he realised the problem. "Just throw it in the back," he grumbled. "You kids and your bikes, I don't know."

Mike had a feeling that last part was more for Hopper's benefit than his own, so he bit back his knee-jerk retort with masterful restraint and darted over to the bush. His bike was right where he left it, and by the time he managed to walk it over the grass to the roadside, Hopper had moved the truck to idle at the edge of the lot, providing a modicum of shelter from any potential prying eyes.

Hopper settled the bike in the back before walking around to the driver's seat. El had already slid over to the middle, thankfully, so Mike squeezed in next to her and shut the door. Her arm was pressing into his own and he relaxed into it, pointedly ignoring Hopper's raised eyebrow.

Hey, it had been nearly a year. He figured a little arm-touching was okay.

El seemed to feel the same way, judging by the way she picked up his hand and entwined his fingers with her own before resting it back on his leg. Hopper gave her an inscrutable look, but she didn't seem the least bit cowed, returning his stare with an equally fierce look of her own.

The Chief sighed and shook his head, then slammed the truck in gear and peeled off onto the road.

They drove in silence, Hopper fuming quietly in the driver's seat, Mike stewing against the passenger door, and El staring straight

ahead with steely determination. There was a staticky tension in the air that only increased as the drive went on, and no one was willing to make the first move to disrupt it.

It wasn't until they reached the dirt road that would eventually turn into the Byers' driveway that it finally came to a head. Hopper was the first to break, jerking the wheel sideways to veer off the pavement and pulling to a stop on the shoulder of the road, pulling up the handbrake and killing the engine in one swift move. He then twisted sideways in his seat, his right hand still tight on the steering wheel, and eyed the two of them with suspicion.

"How much did you hear?" he asked in a carefully even tone.

Mike determinedly didn't look at El and shrugged.

El didn't seem to share Mike's concerns. "Some," she replied, bluntly. "Billy's father is a bad man."

Briefly, Hopper's expression flickered to one of repulsion, then he sighed and dragged a weary hand down his face. When he finished, he looked like he had aged five years.

"Yes, he is," he agreed. "But that doesn't excuse Billy's behaviour."

"Mouth-breather," El concurred, and Hopper nodded.

Mike chewed his lip, awkwardly, feeling oddly like an intruder. He had been doing his best not to think about it, too angry with Hopper to *want* to think about it, but he couldn't ignore it any longer.

Three hundred and fifty-three days.

It was a hell of a lot longer than a week, and it showed. Hopper wasn't talking over El's head like he did the rest of them, and he wasn't talking down to her either. Even with just a few brief sentences, they managed to convey more understanding toward each other than Mike had shared with his family in over a year.

"And you," Hopper cut right through his thoughts, his voice noticeably less soft as he turned his attention to Mike. "What the hell were you *thinking*?"

So much for understanding.

That familiar anger immediately began to rise in response to the Chief's furious tone, but Mike was getting better at wrangling it back down. He swallowed back the swear words on his tongue and settled instead for narrowing his eyes in a glare.

"You know what I was thinking," he retorted, disdain colouring his voice.

"Don't."

Hopper's mouth twisted, his left palm slamming against the steering wheel with an angry *smack*. "You *weren't* thinking, from where I'm sitting," he snarled. "I *told* you it was too risky, and you ignored me and went behind my back! You could have gotten her caught – or killed!"

"Stop it."

"Oh please," Mike spat, no longer able to hold back. His limbs were stiff, shaking slightly with repressed rage. "You keep trotting out that line like it's an excuse for sitting back and doing nothing, but guess what? You can't just keep her locked up forever, and you can't just walk over everyone else in the name of keeping her safe. She *wanted* to help!"

"STOP!"

A loud cracking sound punctuated the shout, and Mike's heart leapt into his throat. Before his eyes, a large fissure appeared, zig-zagging along the windscreen, stretching the full length of the glass from one end to the other.

Mike froze, jaw dropping in surprise, and turned wide eyes to El.

The girl's grip was once again tight on his hand, her eyes wild. She glared at the road, her cheeks pink with hurt, and a small trickle of blood leaked from her nose.

"Just stop it, both of you," she repeated, quieter.

Mike shut up.

Beyond El, Hopper seemed equally taken aback. He opened his mouth to speak, but then seemed to think better of it, and instead leaned back into his seat and closed his eyes. Mike squinted, confused, and noticed the Chief's lips moving in a silent count as he took a deliberate breath in, held it, then slowly exhaled.

Oh.

He'd seen this before, a few years ago when his parents were going through that 'rough patch' that consisted of endless arguments, 'work trips' and empty wine bottles. He'd never thought to try it himself, but he supposed it was worth a shot.

Keeping one eye on the older man, Mike copied him, trying his best to match his breaths with the Chief's.

In, count to five, then out.

In, count to five, then out.

He lost track of how many breaths he took. Gradually, his rage receded, loosening its strangling grip on his mind with each careful breath, until finally he could think clearly once more.

His gaze wandered from the Chief, to the cracked windscreen, and finally to El, and guilt crashed over him like a flood.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, squeezing El's hand apologetically. There was a lump in his throat, his vision misty with unshed tears, but the reigns were once again his and he was determined to see this through. He looked past her, waiting until Hopper opened his eyes and caught his gaze, and summoned his courage. Why did this seem more difficult than going into the tunnels last night? "Sorry," he managed.

The Chief blinked, surprised, but handled the apology with uncharacteristic grace. "I'm sorry too," the older man replied, unusually genuine. "To both of you. I shouldn't have yelled."

Mike nodded, feeling small and uncertain in a way that was all-too-

familiar lately.

El, sensing the relief of tension in the cabin, wriggled a little and pinned Mike with a meaningful gaze. "Some fathers try to do better," she said, bluntly.

Hopper's brow scrunched, confused, but Mike felt the words slam into him like at truck. For a moment, he hesitated, his gaze darting back and forth between her and Hopper.

Then, he sighed in capitulation. "Yeah, they do."

El smiled, her eyes lighting with satisfaction, and apparently decided that nothing more needed to be said. She settled back into her seat, fixing her gaze through the broken windscreen, which meant the Mike found himself once again staring at Hopper's confused gaze.

And, well. If that was how it was, he might as well get on with it, he supposed.

"Thanks for doing that," Mike blurted, abruptly. "Do you think Billy will listen?"

Hopper seemed nonplussed by the sudden change of topic, but rolled with it like a pro. "I think so. Guys like Billy are usually cowards, at the end of the day."

"Good. If something happens to Max?"

"You come straight to me, and I'll take care of him." Hopper's voice was suddenly severe, as serious as he had been during the stress of the night before. "None of your games this time, okay? I promise I'm here to help."

"Okay, then. Deal." Mike punctuated his words with a sharp nod, then turned back to the windscreen, effectively ending the conversation.

He could feel Hopper stare at him with a mixture of confusion and frustration, but the older man apparently decided to quit while he was ahead. There was a sigh from the driver's seat, then the sound of the engine restarting.

They finished the drive just as they began it, in silence. But, now, the undercurrent of tension was gone, replaced by the camaraderie of shared understanding.

As it turned out, Hopper wasn't El's warden. He was her father, and he was trying his best.

Mike could work with that.

A/N: I promise there'll be actual interaction with Mike and Max in the next (final) chapter! Mike just has so much unresolved stuff going on in his head in season 2, I felt like he needed to sort some of it out first. Plus, Hopper and El were just a joy to write. Thanks so much for reading!

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

"Just like that. Hold it steady."

Max only just barely refrained from rolling her eyes but did as she was told, holding the contraption still while Lucas superglued it together, his tongue sticking out with the force of his concentration.

It was last period and they were sitting on the floor of the science lab, surrounded by a veritable disaster zone of plastic and wooden scraps. Mr Clarke had given the class a project to create a device that would stop an egg from cracking if dropped from the roof of the gym, then set them loose with a roomful of equipment to let their imaginations run wild. Most of the students had lost interest a full twenty minutes ago and were now lazing on the floor in small groups, keeping up only the barest pretence of working while they chatted to their friends.

But not her group of nerds.

Their faces had lit with an unexpected level of excitement, and they immediately huddled together for an eager planning session. A few suggestions were shot down, mostly by Dustin and Mike, but finally they managed to come up with an idea that everyone was willing to try. Within minutes, Will had sketched out a basic design for their project, at which point Lucas declared himself head of engineering and set to work, roping Max into the project as his assistant.

Max was starting to realise why these guys didn't have many friends.

But, hey. With their help, she actually stood a chance at getting a B in science, for once. So that was a bonus.

Lucas finished his work with a flourish, setting the glue down on the ground and gently stabilising the contraption from the other side. "It'll take at least ten minutes to dry," he warned. "We'll have to hold it still until then."

"I think I can manage that," Max said, dryly.

Raised voices drew her attention to her left, where the other three boys were still hammering out the final details of the design.

"Aeroplanes, helicopters – *literally anyone doing work at altitude, ever* – uses parachutes, Dustin!" Mike was saying in an exasperated voice.

Dustin threw his hands in the air. "Mr Clarke said we had to be prepared for all variables. If we put a parachute on this thing and there's a gust of wind, do you know what will happen to our egg? It'll be a bloodbath!"

"That's not even – ugh. Alright, but what if it rains? It'll soak right through your ultra-light material and drag the whole thing down. Will, you're with me, right?"

Will was biting his cheek, looking like he was desperately trying not to laugh.

Max felt herself break into a smile at the sight.

"I think you're both right," Will finally responded, diplomatic as ever. "Mr Clarke didn't say we couldn't modify the device for different weather conditions, though. Why don't we use the light-weight material as the baseline prototype, but add in a water-proof cover and parachute in case it rains?"

Lucas pointed at Will enthusiastically. "Yes!" he shouted. "We're doing that!"

Mike and Dustin both hesitated, taking a long moment to stare each other down. Something unspoken passed between them, and they seemed to come to some sort of agreement, both nodding at the same time.

"Let's go look for the materials," Dustin proposed, springing up from his seated position. He dragged Will to his feet and started beelining for the box of fabric near Mr Clarke's desk, Mike following hot on their heels.

Max watched them go, perhaps a little more closely than she

intended. She only turned back when Lucas cleared his throat, and dropped her gaze to her lap when she realised he was studying her.

"What?" she asked, sharply.

Lucas shifted his grip, taking his time to respond. "Nothing. You just seem happy, that's all."

Did she? Max supposed she was. It had been a few weeks since that night in the tunnels, and in that time Billy hadn't bothered her once. She still got an anxious lump in her throat when she reluctantly opened her front door at dinnertime, but at least she was able to hide away in her room without him bashing down the door. And then there was school, which was a hell of a lot more fun now that she had friends to keep her company.

She shrugged. "I was just thinking the same about Will," she said, instead. "It's surprising, considering. But in a good way."

Lucas' expression shuttered. "Yeah," he said, quietly. "He's had a rough year."

Max made a noise of agreement. "Mike, too," she added, surprising herself. She hadn't spent a lot of time with the dark-haired boy, but she would have to be blind to not notice the change that come over him. He was still snarky, but the malice she had begun to associate with him had completely evaporated, replaced by an energetic boy with gentle eyes and an infectious grin. "I can't believe he spent that whole time thinking El was dead."

"What? No, Mike didn't think she was dead."

Max blinked, confused. "But I thought…?"

Lucas met her eyes, sadness lurking in his own. "Mike never believed she was gone. It would have been easier if he had. But he swore he saw her once, and heard her on the radio, and…oh."

Suddenly, Lucas' mouth dropped open in horror, his shoulders sagging. "I told him he was crazy," he whispered, guiltily.

Max winced. "Ouch."

"Yeah."

Lucas dropped his gaze back to the contraption, his throat working. The silence was suddenly awkward, and Max desperately searched for a new topic of conversation.

She was saved by the bell clamouring through the building, the noise level in the room suddenly rising tenfold as the entire class clattered to their feet.

The rest of the Party materialised as though they had been summoned, Mike wasting no time in shoving his books into his backpack.

"You're going to see her?" Dustin asked, raising an eyebrow at his haphazard movements.

"Uh huh," Mike replied, not bothering to look up. He zipped his bag up and straightened, slinging the strap over his shoulder. "See you guys tomorrow."

"Wait!"

Huh. Max hadn't really intended to say that. She could have sworn she used to have a better filter.

Everyone was watching her with varying degrees of curiosity, except for Mike, who was just staring at her impatiently.

"Uh," she started, before squaring her shoulders and meeting Mike's gaze head-on. "Can I come?"

The boy looked taken-aback, his jaw gaping open with surprise. "Why?"

Embarrassment was starting to burn its way up her neck. "I want to."

Mike still looked bewildered, his gaze drifting to Lucas for help. The darker boy shrugged, nonplussed, so Mike turned back to her. "Alright, then." He jerked his head in the direction of the door. "Come on."

Dustin took over for Max. She waited until he had a good grip on the device before letting go, then scrambled to her feet and grabbed her still-unpacked bag from her desk. By the time she had it, Mike was already hovering near the door, and she hurried to catch up.

He didn't speak much, his mind clearly already at the cabin, so Max kept quiet and focussed on following his footsteps. He beelined for his bike, wheeling it back from the stand and swinging one leg over, then hesitated and looked over at her for the first time since leaving the room.

"Did you want to skateboard, or…?" Mike's voice was oddly uncertain, and he trailed off in favour of nodding at the seat behind him.

Oh.

"Uh, no thanks. I mean, I'm good." Max forced a tight smile, then dropped her board to ground and rested one foot on top. "Ready?"

Mike didn't bother replying, merely pushing off from the sidewalk and leading the way. He let her set the pace, dawdling his bike up the hills and coasting down the other side, calling out directions whenever they had to make a sudden turn.

They passed the arcade, riding in the opposite direction to Max's house, so it didn't take long for her to become thoroughly lost. Luckily, Mike seemed to know the streets like the back of his hand, and it only took another fifteen minutes before he skidded to a stop at the edge of the woods.

Max jumped off her board behind him, kicking it into her hand and squinting at the mostly-concealed dirt track wending a path through the trees. She would have missed it if Mike hadn't pointed it out.

"It gets pretty uneven," Mike explained, somewhat apologetically. "I usually just hide my bike in the trees and walk the rest of the way."

Max nodded, tucking her board under arm and falling into step beside him. "Let's go, then."

His large eyes were scrutinising her, his lips pulled down into a

frown, but after a moment he turned and started down the path. Max kept pace with him, deliberately keeping her eyes on the way ahead and ignoring his curious gaze as he periodically turned to stare at her.

Finally, though, he seemed to reach his limit.

"Alright, hold up," he said, abruptly halting and forcing her to stop beside him. "Why are you here?"

Max widened her eyes in feigned hurt. "What, I can't spend time with you guys?"

Mike's suspicious gaze deepened, his eyes scanning her face for any clues. "You haven't before - not even when Lucas came along. What's going on?"

Max opened her mouth, a hundred replies ready on her lips, and -

Maybe I should just go home

I made a rash decision and now I'm sticking with it

I want to find out what the big deal is with Eleven

I'm sick of feeling like an outsider to the only friends I've made in this town

- and she shut her mouth again with a snap.

She glared at the soil beneath her feet, scuffing her shoes against the ground. When she chanced a look back at Mike, she was surprised to find his brow creased with concern rather than annoyance.

"I want you to like me," she blurted out.

And…what?

She stood stiffly, helpless against the furious blush that was rising in her cheeks, and fixed her gaze on a point over Mike's shoulder.

She hadn't meant to say that.

What the fuck had happened to her filter?

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Mike's jaw drop. She was determined not to look at him, though, unless she could somehow find a way to shrivel up into a little ball, so she couldn't tell if he was angry or surprised.

God, to be anywhere else but here, right now. Even home would be better than this.

The silence stretched on, a penny spinning to infinity.

Then, Mike awkwardly cleared his throat. "Uh, I'm flattered, but…"

"What? Oh, *god no.* Not like that! No way. Just like…friendship-wise. You know?"

Her mind was whirling, her mouth rambling at breakneck speed, and she didn't even notice that she was looking Mike in the face until it was too late. Fortunately, he seemed just as embarrassed as she was, his eyes wide as dollars and his sweaty palms clenched tightly to the straps of his backpack.

"Oh," he mumbled, shifting awkwardly. "That makes more sense."

Max snorted. "Yeah, no shit."

That earned her a brief laugh.

Mike fell silent, watching her with an almost contemplative expression on his face. Ordinarily, that look would have immediately sent her defences roaring back up, but there was something different about it now. Maybe it was the stillness of the air around them, or the isolation of their surroundings.

Or maybe it was just the relief of finally having it out in the open, of tearing down this invisible barrier that had separated them for weeks.

Whatever it was, it had her skin tingling with anticipation, with the hope that the last piece of the puzzle could finally fall into place, that maybe she could feel like she actually fit in with this group of misfit nerds that had so quickly wormed their way into her heart.

Something must have clicked in Mike's mind. His expression suddenly fell, heavy with guilt, and he took a small, shuffling step closer.

"I don't think you're annoying," he said, quickly, as though it would somehow be easier to say if he got it out faster. "Or, you know, no more than Lucas and Dustin are sometimes. And the way you stood up to your stepbrother and stole his car really was incredible."

Max raised an eyebrow, deliberately masking the warmth that was growing in her chest. "And…?" she said, teasingly.

Mike's eyes widened, and Max's breath caught. Fuck. Had she misread the situation? Had she screwed it up yet again?

Then he rolled his eyes heavenward, heaving a long-suffering sigh. "And I like you, okay?" he moaned, dramatically. "Is that what you want to hear?"

Her breath released from its chokehold, somehow transforming into a genuine chuckle on its way out. "Maybe, maybe not," she sing-songed. "God, you're such a girl."

"Hey!"

Mike was clearly going for offended, but his broad grin negated any contrition she might have felt. His hands finally relaxed from his white-knuckled clutch, and he nudged her with his shoulder before starting to walk again, leading the way to the cabin.

"You coming?" he asked over his shoulder, and Max gave herself a shake and hurried to catch up. "Because we've only got a few hours before dinner, and I'm pretty sure El's going to want to learn to skate. I hope you're a good teacher."

Max glanced at him, surprised, then grinned, warmth blossoming in her chest and spreading to her limbs.

This was going to be fun.

The egg project is totally stolen from a random episode of Modern Family - one of the early seasons, I'm not sure which.

Anyway, this was an absolute joy to write, so I hope you enjoyed reading this! This was my first attempt at writing Stranger Things fic and although I don't have any other plans for fics in this fandom right now, I can definitely see myself coming back to it – these characters are just so much fun.

Thanks for reading! xx